

Citizens push for overhaul of California government

A group of business leaders, government officials, labor leaders and others holds a state constitutional convention summit to urge a reworking of the state's political and bureaucratic processes.



Photograph of Lt. Governor John Garamendi listening to a constituent in Northridge by Gary Friedman, Los Angeles Times

By Eric Bailey

[Los Angeles Times](#): Just days after the state's budget brinkmanship drew renewed public scorn, a banquet hall full of concerned citizens Tuesday took the first steps toward what many consider a better idea -- an overhaul of California government.

The road to change being championed by a collection of business leaders and good-government groups from around the state is a constitutional convention.

California hasn't engaged in such a major reworking of its political and bureaucratic machinery in more than a century, since 1878. But amid the state's cresting fiscal and political misfortunes,

boosters see a prime opportunity to push for a dramatic retooling of its constitution and the mix of lawmaking and bureaucratic processes it governs.

"This is the groundbreaking moment that can set the stage for the change California needs," said Jim Wunderman, president of the Bay Area Council, the business group sponsoring the forum. "The system for operating the state is badly broken."

A hotel ballroom near the Capitol was packed with business leaders and government officials, labor leaders and public interest champions, schoolteachers and plain old John and Jane Q. Public.

Bringing about a constitutional convention, let alone figuring out just how it would run, could prove a steep climb, they said. The Legislature can, with a two-thirds vote, call for a convention. But many at the gathering said that was an iffy bet, given the partisan divisions within the Legislature.

"Heads or tails," said Lt. Gov. John Garamendi minutes after he delivered an address to 400 participants packed in the Sheraton Hotel ballroom.

He plucked a dime from his pocket and flipped it. "I think it's a long shot," he said.

Many think a ballot measure next year proposing a constitutional convention is the likely avenue but admit even that popular staple of California elections might be a tough sell.

"I think it's probably necessary to have real fundamental change in California," Dave Kadlecsek of Californians for Electoral Reform said during a break. "But I'm not sure it will actually happen."

Wunderman said in an interview that the California Constitutional Convention Summit, as the day's session was titled, is meant to ignite debate -- and to catch the wave of public disapproval

over Sacramento's recent performance.

"We've got to do Management 101 here," he said. "We've got a broken bureaucracy."

A bright spotlight was trained on lawmakers last week as they stumbled repeatedly in their attempt to gain the two-thirds vote needed to fill California's \$41-billion budget hole.

"Don't waste a good crisis," advised William T. Bagley, a former state assemblyman and University of California regent from Marin County.

Aside from the budget conundrum, there are plenty of other examples of the routine difficulties state government demonstrates in trying to solve California's most intractable problems -- crowded prisons, a broken water system, flagging schools and an ideologically polarized Legislature.

"I was at the final straw probably five years ago," said Debilyn Molineaux of the Transpartisan Center, a Washington-based group pushing to defuse the political process. "I've just been waiting for everyone else to catch up."

To build a better government, boosters want to convene a potentially months-long convention made up of people of all stripes from every corner of California. How that will be accomplished remains a question.

Wunderman suggested upward of 200 people, perhaps selected like a jury pool. Unlike Sacramento lawmakers, he insisted, "they won't have special interests on their back."

Garamendi stopped short of endorsing a convention but noted that on his home turf of Mokelumne Hill in rural Amador County, they have town hall meetings to settle differences. A convention would simply be bigger, said Garamendi, who says he would love to see changes such as a simple-majority requirement for passing budgets and a switch to a single-house

Legislature.

Among the other topics discussed during the day included a reassessment of term limits, alterations to the tax system and perhaps even a switch in the state's tradition of ballot-box governing.

But, as some speakers noted, the effort is missing some key elements. There was not a representative number of women or people of color in the hall Tuesday, and many of the notions of reform being espoused were not the sort that fiscal conservatives normally embrace.

And the support of the Legislature is an open question.

Assembly Speaker Karen Bass (D-Los Angeles) said, "Several things need to change in our state, and if a constitutional convention is the way we can accomplish that, I'm all for it."

But she wants the Legislature to stay focused on the state's many current problems, with the question of a convention left to others.

Without legislative approval, Californians would have to change the state Constitution, giving the electorate the authority to invoke a convention.

The product of the convention would also have to go to the electorate before any changes could be enshrined.